

Scientific Report for a "Short Visit" as part of the EURO-XPRAG project "An experimental investigation of long-distance indefinites in English and German"

Applicants: Dr. Cornelia Ebert, University of Stuttgart (Germany) and Prof. Britta Stolterfoht, University of Tübingen (Germany)

Host: Prof. Tania Ionin, University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign (USA)

Duration of stay: five days (Tuesday, April 5 – Sunday, April 10).

Purpose of the visit

The aim of this meeting was to discuss the (preliminary) results of a collectively designed experiment and to discuss the designs of two follow-up experiments.

Description of the work carried out during the visit and of the main results obtained

We discussed the preliminary results of the first truth value judgement task experiment (henceforth: experiment 1) of our envisaged experiment series on exceptional wide scope readings laid out in the project description. One and the same experiment was carried out in two languages, one in Urbana-Champaign (on English determiners) and one in Tübingen (on German determiners). We discussed the consequences of the results for English and German as separate languages and in comparison. It turned out that determiner choice plays a role in both languages, but accent is only a relevant factor in German and not in English. English "a" prefers narrow scope readings, while "one" – whether accented or not – shows a preference for wide scope readings. In German, the enclitic "n" as well as distressed "ein" clearly prefer narrow scope. Stressed "ein" on the other hand allows for both wide and narrow scope readings almost equally well and it certainly allows for wide scope more readily than the unstressed variant of "ein" and "n". While it was expected that the choice of determiner plays a role for the interpretation possibilities in both languages it is striking that stress plays a role in German, but not in English. This is probably due to the fact that English has two lexical alternatives ("one" and "a"), but German does not, where "ein" is the only possible choice. There is one other result that calls for an explanation: while in English "one" seems to prefer wide scope and "a" seems to prefer narrow scope, things are not as clear-cut in German, where unstressed "ein" clearly prefers narrow scope, but stressed "ein" apparently allows for both readings.

During our meeting, we furthermore developed two follow-up experiments that bear on the results of experiment 1. The next envisaged experiment is an acceptability judgement task that aims at testing for an overall narrow scope preference of indefinites. The results from experiment 1 suggest that at least in German there is an overall tendency for indefinites to be interpreted with narrow scope. This would explain the fact that even stressed "ein" does not show a clear preference for wide scope, but the wide scope interpretation probability only increases as compared to unstressed "ein" or enclitic "n". We want to test for the narrow scope preference of the different determiners that were already contrasted in experiment 1.

The second follow-up experiment will be another truth value judgement task experiment that is aimed at locating the exact source for the differences we found in experiment 1. That "one" and stressed "ein" allow for wide scope interpretations more readily than their alternatives could be either due to the fact that these determiners simply embody a wide scope interpretation preference. Or alternatively, stressing "ein" or choosing "one" as opposed to "a" enforces a contrastive interpretation as in "one" versus "two" or "three" etc. In experiment 1 the wide scope interpretation is indeed the only one that would render such a contrastive interpretation felicitous, while in the narrow scope interpretations there is no reasonable contrast that can be found. Hence, the deeper reason for the wide scope preference of "one"

and stressed "ein" could, in fact, be the desire of these determiners to be interpreted contrastively. Our planned truth value judgement task will test for this possibility. Both follow-up experiments will be accomplished again in two languages, English and German.

Future collaboration with host institution

Future collaboration with Tania Ionin is planned as part of our EURO-XPRAG project. A short visit of Tania Ionin in Stuttgart or Tübingen is planned for September 2011, mainly to discuss the results of the two follow-up experiments and design the other experiments described in our project plan.

Projected publications/articles resulting or to result from the grant

At this early stage, this collaboration has not resulted in any publications yet. However, several presentations of our work at workshops and conferences are scheduled:

May 2011: talk in the guest lecture series of the SFB (collaborative research center) 732 of the University of Stuttgart

talk at the conference "Semantik und Pragmatik im Südwesten", University of Mainz

June 2011: poster at Experimental Pragmatics Conference, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona

August 2011: invited talk at ESSLLI summer school as part of the workshop "The proper use of quantification in ordinary language"

Other comments

We arranged for our first meeting at the University of Chicago during the annual meeting of the Chicago Linguistics Society. We took the opportunity to meet there because Tania Ionin was presenting at the conference and there were several presentations that were concerned with topics addressed in our project.